

# Aiming at More Mobility

by Mary Frances Dunham

"ROADS and roads everywhere but no way to go," complains a Dhaka dweller about the city's traffic congestion. His cry like many others seems to fall on deaf ears. "Poor mobility persists, not only hindering individuals but threatening the city's welfare as a whole."

## A New Approach to Traffic Policies

As a bicyclist from New York City, I notice that in Dhaka discussions about traffic often seem to come from a car user's point of view — that is, looking at mobility from the top downwards. What about considering traffic from the bottom up — through the eyes, say, of a rickshaw cyclist or a mere bicyclist like myself? Maybe improvements that serve the weakest road users, including pedestrians, can serve the other members as well.

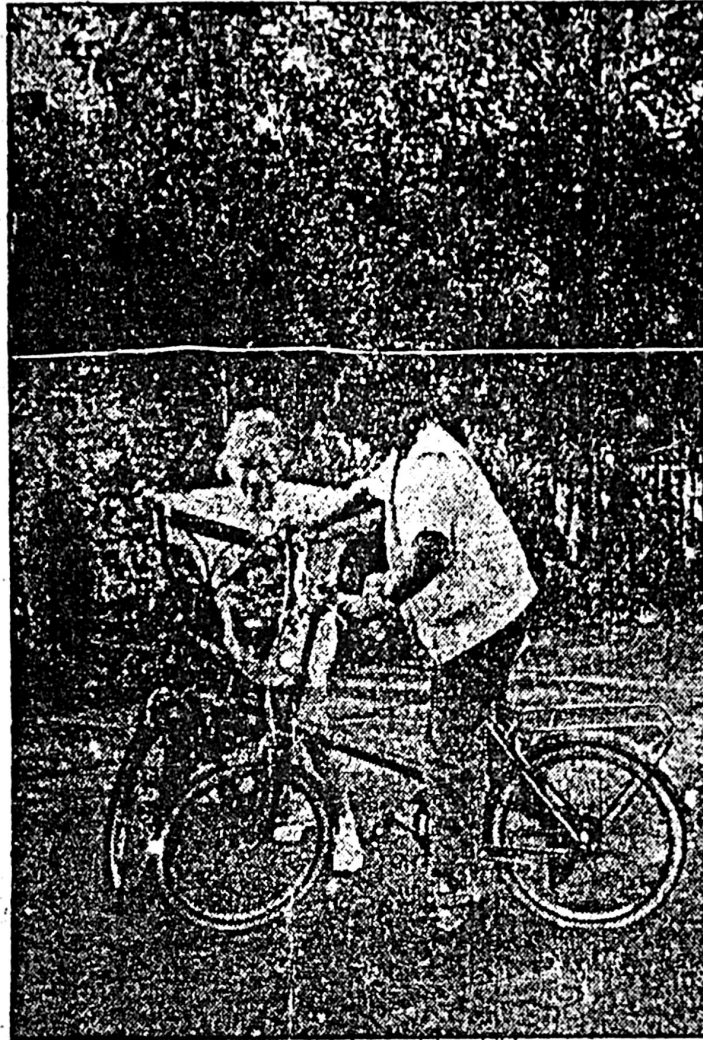
Dhaka's flat terrain and compact size are ideal for pedal-powered travel. Unfortunately, transportation policies in cities frequently favour private cars rather than humbler modes of transportation. As in New York, Dhaka's rickshaw cyclists, in spite of all their valuable service, are blamed for congestion and often treated like outcasts.

## False Remedies

Taking into consideration the harm caused by "heavy" vehicles and the virtues of "light" transportation, what can Dhaka do to preserve its high ratio of human-powered transportation?

First, Dhaka's city planners and traffic engineers could re-examine common solutions to congestion that have proved detrimental to "light" travel without significant improvement to mass mobility. In Dhaka planners and traffic engineers have relied too much on such remedies as 1) widening roads, 2) segregating non-motorized sectors of traffic into specialized lanes, or 3) banning these sectors from chosen roadways. Such medicines improve mobility mainly for motorized sectors in low-density areas of cities where congestion is mild to begin with, but in commercial areas these remedies unfairly restrict the mobility of non-motorized travellers and bring only short term relief to the motorized ones.

This is especially true in



Riding a cycle — pleasant for children too

the case of widening roadways. Taking the case of New York, enlarged road space generally invites more traffic than anticipated and sooner than expected. Newly widened roadways re-congest within a few years. On widened avenues in Dhaka — New Eskaton Road, for example — shops, vendors and parked vehicles encroach on the added space; today's increased volume of moving traffic is confined to the same lanes as before, after such avenues were widened.

Channelling vehicles into traffic lanes, a time-honored way to organize the flow of traffic, is an unrealistic solution where traffic is as highly mixed as in New York and Dhaka. The variety of traffic sectors, each with its own style of motion defies orderly formation. Watching the traffic on many Dhaka avenues, I wonder why anyone bothered to paint lane lines there. In order to maintain momentum, I myself fail to

follow a straight path. On the roads entering the New Market, Motijheel and other commercial districts of Dhaka (not to mention even wide roadways in Dhaka's "Old City") only heavy laden rickshaws, "vans" and "thela gari" moves as directly forward as possible; other vehicles, like rivers, follow respective paths of least resistance.

Banning "nuisance" vehicles on arterial roadways in Dhaka, a popular method to increase specifically the mobility of motorized vehicles, not only restricts car-less people to their neighborhoods for shopping and business, but in a short time invites cars to re-congest these arteries.

A world-famous ban on rickshaws in Dhaka's Motijheel area was cancelled.

The on-going ban on rickshaws from Dhaka's Airport Road allows motorized vehicles to make time, but only up to the Farm Gate Intersection where time gained is lost in

the accumulation of traffic at that point. Meanwhile, rickshaw cyclists are forced to make lengthy detours that would be easier for cars to accomplish. Pedestrians, the most abused travellers in Dhaka, in order to cross a virtual expressway, must walk a long way to reach an intersection, or else risk their lives dodging through fast flowing traffic.

## Traffic Balance in Dhaka

Unless conventional measures improve mobility significantly for all traffic sectors, why should the "heavy" vehicles be favoured by them while the needs of "light" ones are neglected?

Dhaka still has time to answer this question with more balanced transportation policies and with time for traffic to adapt to them before more cars fill the city. At relatively low cost, the government could show moral if not material support for "light" mobility. Rickshaws could be re-instated on roads where they have been banned. In addition to the guidance that traffic agents currently give at intersections, other agents could be stationed at strategic points between intersections to monitor speeding vehicles, to help pedestrians cross, and to assist human-powered vehicles to make their necessary U-turns and short runs against traffic. The traffic circles in Dhaka where traffic behaviour is particularly complex could be furnished with additional agents to guide vehicles as they join and leave the circular flow.

Other ways for Dhaka to achieve equitable mobility are too numerous to mention here and their utility depends on individual site conditions; what works in New York or other cities may be unsuitable for Dhaka. However, the concept of sharing roads fairly appeals to most humans (even to motorists when they think about it) and the idea is worth applying here as much as possible. It can protect Dhaka's human-powered mobility before a growing quantity of cars bring increased accidents, more jams and more air pollution — ills from which car-congested cities around the world now long to escape. Dhaka deserves to avoid these plagues in its further development and to enjoy transportation that is efficient, economic and healthy for generations to come.